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ABSTRACT

This paper examines three areas of alternative education: (1) In what ways, and for whom, are alternative schools alternative? (2) What appear to be the unanticipated consequences of the creation of alternative schools? (3) Can the creation of alternative schols be considered a change strategy? The authors compare the ideals of alternative education with findings related to alternative schools in operation. An assessment of the characteristics of alternative schocls indicates that they are marked by voluntarism, that they are smaller in size, that they tend to be more informal, that they allow for greater participation in decision-making, and that they involve the community more directly. All of these characteristics, however, can be witnessed in some conventional schools. The authors also discovered that as time passes, participants in alternative schools tend to move back to more traditional teaching styles and more hierarchically arranged structures. They conclude that alternative education can function as a change strategy, although there are certain limitations on its effectiveness. (Author/DS)

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THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL: A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE?

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INTRODUCTION

Three generalizations underlie our discussion of alternative schools.

- Virtually all of the organizational change literature shows that high schools seem impervious to any kind of adaptability or openness to fresh ideas. The negative aspect of this conclusion is compounded during a period when evidence about high school effects indicates that the schools aren't working as we'd wish them to.
- Many alternative schools, mini-schools and schools-within-a-school, are attempting to offer their programs under the same roof as their conventional counterparts.

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- The movement we are discussing began in the mid-60's, a time when egalitarianism, greater participation of, and pressure from, minorities heretofore unrepresented in school decision making comprised the social context. Alternative schools were efforts to operationalize the social themes of the society in schools.

This paper will deal with three questions which we believe are related to one another and will, when answered, give us answers to the overarching question of whether or not alternative schools can be considered within the broad spectrum of strategies for changing schools. The questions, specifically are:

1. In what ways, and for whom, are alternative schools alternative?
2. What appear to be the unanticipated consequences of the creation of alternative schools?
3. Can the creation of alternative schools be considered a change strategy?

We would like it understood at the outset that this paper treats a movement that is only ten years old. We are aware that much of the following discussion is directly and indirectly related to the problems of schooling in general and, therefore, not specific to alternative schools. Consequently, in the same way that we realize that ten-year-old children are different from others who are older or younger, alternative schools, by definition, should be different from schools

which we might consider to be in the conventional mode. The schools which we have chosen to call conventional share a much longer and more complex history than alternative schools. Given this, though, we are concerned about finding the differences between the two modes of schooling--alternative and conventional--and, in the attempt, may be accused of criticizing alternative schools too harshly or giving them too much credit based on too limited evidence. We recognize this potential danger but hope that you will agree that it is important to begin a systematic study, perhaps only at the descriptive level, of a schooling movement that appears to have captured the imagination and altered the behaviors of many people in schools.

IN WHAT WAYS, AND FOR WHOM, ARE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS ALTERNATIVE?

We believe that there are two sources of information that will help us to answer this question. The first, and probably the most commonly depended upon, body of available data might be labelled propositional/rhetorical in that it includes ideological positions, quasi-theoretical formulations, and speculations about the creation and life of alternative schools. This information offers us a platform or set of assumptions, beliefs, and proposed practices from which we can observe schools as living organizations. The second source of information, much more limited in quantity, provides us with reports about and findings related to alternative schools in operation. Obviously, Ellis' paper has illustrated the utility of examining the first body of literature as one means to approach contributing to the second. Both Miller and Wenoker, as well as Ellis, have contributed significantly to

the growing body of evidence about the life of alternative schools. We will use the papers presented in this session as major sources of ideas and findings as well as use our own observations and speculations.

Many have written about alternative schools as ways to humanize, personalize and provide for a setting in which students, teachers and community get more actively involved in the schooling process. We do not question the idea that alternative schools were conceived as an attempt to deal with the growing egalitarianism and reform movements of the 60's. From the Berkeley cry of "do not mutilate," a reflection of a growing alienation of the student culture, to today's disaffected youth in the cities calling for relevance in their education, the alternative school movement appears to be a call for involving more people in decisions traditionally made by teachers, publishers, and curriculum guides: That is, of broadening the experience base of schooling and practicing some of the egalitarian decision making that came to be one of the hallmarks of the 60's.

Regarding the propositional/rhetorical literature, Ellis has pointed to common themes that represent critical variables related directly to the creation and institution of alternative schools in public schools. He noted seven: voluntarism, flexible structures to meet changing needs of students, comprehensive goals and objectives, teacher/student planning in the classroom, cooperative organizational design, humaneness, and school/community commitment. We find this list to be a useful one as we

attempt to see what really happens in working alternative schools. The list might be considered to be a set of operational definitions of aspects of egalitarianism, a term which we will use to represent both the source of the alternative school movement and the response to it in terms of a new form of schooling. In other words, the propositional literature appears to stem from a desire for the creation of schools which will, in some fashion, guarantee human rights to all persons, regardless of differences between and among them, and the operations of alternative schools appear to be a response within public schools to provide those rights to students and teachers. Regarding the propositional side of that stimulus-response coin, the literature abounds with lofty, highly idealized statements of intent which are usually related to the righting of some institutional or pedagogical wrong: How to make schools relevant to disadvantaged students; How to make schools places where each person, student and teacher, has a piece of the action; How to provide opportunities for individual teachers to release their creative and pedagogical potential; How to create educational environments which do not ignore the special individual differences between students; and so forth.

What might be concluded, then, from examination of the propositions and rhetoric surrounding the initiation and continuation of the alternative school movement is that the alternative school was and is seen as a major reform directed at the achievement of long-held but, to many, inadequately realized ideas and ideals about schools generally.

The literature abounds with intentions for alternative schools to be different. Are they?

In trying to answer the question of whether or not alternative schools are truly alternative, it is necessary to examine what evidence we can muster from research studies, reports published, and informal observations of such schools in situ. Unfortunately, the body of such information is limited but, even as we noted that one might not have the same expectations for a ten-year-old that we would for someone several times older, we do not expect to find the same amount of information about that ten-year-old that we would expect to find about someone much older. What we can do is to take what is available, draw some conclusions about alternative schools, and make some tentative speculations.

Clearly, voluntarism is a characteristic of alternative schools which appears to be a precise departure from conventional schools. We must use caution about the breadth of application of that term in that it appears that some alternative schools are set up specifically to draw certain population groups. That is, a schooling magnet is developed and it is not unnatural that that magnet, especially when carefully designed and publicly announced, draws its expected target population. Also, as can be seen from the papers presented in this session and from observations of practice, some alternative schools are designed as places into which students with special defining characteristics are placed. This later example is not voluntarism as proposed by the literature. Then, of course, there are those school systems which provide various forms of schooling and allow, in fact promote, students and

parents to opt for one or the other of the forms. As can be seen, then, voluntarism as a characteristic of alternative schools can be observed to be a continuum from "barely any" to "almost completely." The "almost" occurs, naturally, as a consequence of the alternative school being under the umbrella organization of the public school system which we are aware is not characterized by voluntarism.

Another observed characteristic is small size, in terms of both school and class units. This, of course, has major implications for the life expectancy of alternative schools given the social, political, and economic realities with which all school persons must live today. We will discuss this in more detail later in the paper.

Returning to the notion of egalitarianism noted earlier, it can be seen that the alternative school as an egalitarian response does exhibit new structures, particularly related to decision-making about school matters, which encourage more and different participation styles by the people in the schools. This notion of difference can be looked at from the perspective of who, under what conditions, and with what consequences engages actively in the alternative school organization as mover and shaker rather than as recipient of action and decision. Clearly, alternative schools engage students and teachers in decisions about curriculum, instruction, school organization, and related matters in ways that are not observed widely in conventional schools. As we noted cautions regarding generalizing from the concept of voluntarism, we also caution about characterizing alternative schools as essentially "flat" organizations. Miller, in particular, notes that the

decision making and other organizational variables differ as one observes different alternative schools. We do believe, however, that alternative schools exhibit markedly more participatory decision making modes than do conventional schools and, further, that these modes are much more inclusive of the various school clienteles than those of the conventional school.

Related directly to decision making, the organizational structures which are seen to be present in alternative schools differ from those of conventional schools. Perhaps as a consequence of smaller size in combination with a set of new and different expectations about the nature of schooling, one can observe much greater organizational flexibility in alternative schools than in conventional schools. Although we are not suggesting direct cause/effect relationships, it appears logical to expect that fewer persons, more closely connected in terms of space and, more often than not, bound together by some agreed-to set of ideas and practices will behave in a more mutually-accomodating manner than appears to be possible in large, multi-dimensional, systems.

As has been reported earlier in this session, another observed difference between conventional schools and alternative schools are the perceptions that the adults in the alternative schools have of themselves. Although the popular educational literature is replete with tales of teachers and other educators who seem to move through their professional lives inspiring and altering sharply the lives of others, there is little evidence to suggest that the notion of major social reform underlies the behaviors of most teachers. Alternative schools do appear to have

attracted persons who see themselves and their enacted role functions as embodiments of social reform perspectives. This is not to say, of course, that such socio-political orientations are not present in conventional schools but to suggest that their presence in alternative schools is more obvious and appears more prevalent in terms of how the schools make themselves work.

As to humaneness, the word itself seems to get in the way of clear and precise observation. If one considers humaneness to be the willingness of people in charge to reconsider patterns of individual and organizational behavior and, based upon that reconsideration, to alter certain behaviors, humaneness can be observed in alternative schools. Particularly relevant to this concept is the eagerness of alternative school people to make basic and sharply pointed changes in curriculum offerings, in organizational structure, and in instructional style. These accomodations are more clearly observable demonstrations of humaneness in alternative schools than in conventional schools as we have come to know them.

Perhaps central to much of the above discussion is the tendency toward informality in alternative schools. Informality here is used to label the relations between people in the organization and the ways in which the organization makes fewer formal demands upon participants. It is rather too easy to describe a setting as informal only because it has a few easy chairs, allows eating in classrooms, and lets students move with freedom from activity to activity. These phenomena can be seen in a number of conventional schools. What we are referring

to here is the obvious enacted intentions to produce and foster informality, not just in those classrooms where the teacher permits it, but throughout the school organization as a whole. These informal organizations, allow for the flexibility noted earlier, make accomodations based on mutual and respected agreements, foster a "flattening out" of the hierarchy, and blur the power/authority relations between students and teachers.

As we have suggested, the observed alternative modes which we note can be witnessed in conventional settings--we present them here because we believe they are more pervasive of alternative schools. We suspect that the reason for this is that people who convene and work in alternative settings commit themselves to acting out their beliefs and are willing to engage in the intense struggle, individual and collective, to develop forms which not only acknowledge those beliefs but put them in the forefront as criteria for organizational, curricular, and pedagogical decision making. This willingness and subsequent struggle, however, lead to the observation that as the people continue to expend the tremendous amount of energy necessary to accomplish their goals, the organization tends to move back to a more conventional mode. That is, as time marches on and energy, a limited resource, becomes more scarce, alternative schools begin to regain some of the appearances of conventional schools.

WHAT APPEAR TO BE THE UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES OF THE CREATION OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS?

We ended the last section of this discussion with the comment that alternative school people spend a great deal of time and energy on recreating their workplaces into new modes and noted that this expenditure of precious resources may be related to "burn out." Anyone who has worked in a new setting, to use Sarason's term, knows that this is likely to occur and we do not consider it to be unanticipated. What is unanticipated, perhaps, is what we believe are the sources of such depletion of energy and, for some, commitment.

It is conventionally believed that when persons who, collectively, hold similar views and assumptions that they will move more easily through difficult problems and interact with one another with a more positive style. What observation of alternative schools has demonstrated, however, is that as these like-minded people work together they get closer and closer to basic, elemental problems of schooling--tney, in effect, take the lid off Pandora's box more easily, more cooperatively, and more effectively. Once the lid is off, though, the people must struggle with and confront directly issues regarding education which more conventional schools mask with their vague, diffuse, and hard-to-pin-down ends and means statements. Again and again, one finds alternative school people coping diligently and effectively with curricular and instructional questions that often get lost in a larger school organization. We believe that this observation helps us to understand better the consequences of engaging in creating and maintaining alternative schools as

well as helping us to create strategies and mechanisms to act upon some of the reasons for the pain and travail that our pioneers have surfaced for us.

Another unanticipated consequence related to the creation of an alternative school can be linked to the concept of conflict. Schools have always been, at some level, conflictful institutions. The normal pattern of dealing with large-scale organizational conflict has been to create ways to isolate the conflict from the larger institution. (Conflict here is meant to convey difficult-to-resolve organizational issues rather than to suggest personality differences.) We have seen the creation of classes for the educationally gifted as ways to resolve the problem or conflict about the nature of schooling for a nonvoluntary group. In the same way, we have seen the institutionalization of classes for other students who have some different characteristics, physical or intellectual, from those supposed to be dominant in the total student population. What we may not have realized when we began to operationalize alternative school ideology was that we were, essentially, behaving in much the same fashion as our colleagues and our professional forebears--using the public school as an umbrella organization to contain a like-minded group of persons which could operate somewhat independently while still linked to the larger system. What started off looking like a major innovation in terms of conflict resolution, then, appears to have fallen neatly into the patterns already established by the existent systems. Still another "different" group has been established.

Perhaps as a corollary of the relation of the alternative school to the larger public school system, the splitting off of groups of persons with certain ideological positions seems to have resulted in a sort of de facto segregation. Although certain instances of racial segregation can be seen in the way we are describing segregation, we mean the term to represent a form of distinct shunting off from the larger system of certain groups of persons with like characteristics, not necessarily racial. We suggest that the concept of voluntarism, usually perceived as a positive form of providing access to groups, has, when operationalized, often resulted in groups of students and teachers which must be characterized as more homogeneous than heterogeneous. The homogeneity may be ethnic or racial but it also may be intellectual, social, or emotional. Realizing that we are implicitly stating a value about schooling, we recognize that one of the unanticipated outcomes of the alternative school movement is that voluntarism may have created increased isolation and segregation of groups of people from the larger social structure.

Returning to the issue of conflict, and remembering that one of the consequences of the decision to create and live in an alternative school is the expenditure of tremendous amounts of human energy, we observe that adults in alternative settings indicate a high level of satisfaction. One might suspect that the persistent demands of and for participatory style, the necessity to create and act out new curricula, and the need to reconstruct a socially-ingrained institution would result in a decrease in satisfaction which would correspond in

negative relation to the demands made upon the participants. However, quite the opposite appears to be the case.

Participants in alternative schools tend to move back to the well-learned pedagogical styles and the school organization back to more hierarchically arranged structures. Given the zeal and the energies which usually are found in alternative schools, it is surprising to some that this reversion to "business as usual" occurs. We would suggest that this is a natural consequence of innovation and that we should not be surprised that it occurs. Miller, in fact, has noted that as the alternative school grows older the tendency to revert to known patterns is more apparent to the observer. A question which arises out of this conclusion is whether or not alternative schools have a "life cycle" which can be observed, described, analyzed. We would speculate that such is the case and may be a major source of unexpected outcomes.

Another unanticipated consequence of creating an alternative school within a public school system is that co-optation appears to take place. The term alternative school becomes a synonym for "good." What seems to have happened is that now school systems wishing to present certain images tag the label "alternative" on those images and use the label to mean something on the order of "Look at how well-meaning and caring we are." What one observes when one gets behind the label, however, is quite often conventional schooling. In other words, anything different is alternative and anything alternative is somehow good or better and we are in the business

of trying to be better so we begin to adopt the labels without the substance. The term alternative school, then, loses meaning. A student of ours commented last week, "We now have a network of alternative schools in District X." We asked, "Are they really alternative according to some specified criteria?" "No," he answered, "they are just trying to make schools work."

We may be asking the alternative school people to take on tasks that the rest of us have never really been able to accomplish when we suggest that an unanticipated outcome is the lack of precise attention on the part of the participants to basic questions of evaluation. Along with the rest of schools, alternative schools are now faced with social forces which are making ever-more-loudly voiced demands for "accountability." The conventional schools have a body of somewhat unreliable evidence in terms of scores on standardized or criterion-referenced tests. What alternate form of evidence of success has come from the alternate school movement generally? It may be that alternative school people have done as well as their conventional counterparts in terms of evaluation, but given the climate of today and the difficulty of measuring some of the new components of alternative schools, this could become a major problem.

CAN THE CREATION OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS BE CONSIDERED A CHANGE STRATEGY?

Based on the evidence which we have been examining here and which has emerged elsewhere, our answer will have to be "yes . . . and no."

Beginning positively, we can agree that alternative schools can be considered strategies for change in that certain accomodations are made by and for people, i.e. structures of schooling, participatory decision making and the substance of schooling, and that we now have increased knowledge about certain aspects of schools. Alternative schools are clearly different for teachers when they provide a means for increased involvement in decisions regarding curriculum, use of time and space, and demonstration of idiosyncratic or not-widely-practiced pedagogy. We must remember, however, that Miller found that alternative schools often look strikingly like the conventional schools that the founders left to create the new structure. Even so, both Wenoker and Miller provide evidence that the schools are perceived as being different. This , to us, is important when we think of the underlying assumptions and practices associated with intentional change. Also, the adults in the settings see themselves as engaging in far more professional decisions and practicing a more professional mode of behavior than their conventional counterparts.

We answer yes also when we see that the structure of the organization can be differentiated from that of the conventional school. Miller's Type IV is clearly different from Type I. As people who have noted the impact of the organizational structure upon participants, we are encouraged by the apparent relation in alternative schools between structure and human behavior.

Another positive finding related to the alternative school is the interaction between the community and the school. Although history

has been replete with calls for such interaction, it appears that the alternative school truly exhibits the characteristics of school/community interdependence to a greater degree than have conventional schools. This, to us, is a very important change-related observation of practice.

Although we earlier called to question the relative absence of our ten-year-old's influence upon new modes of evaluation, we are aware that much of what is new in instruction and in curriculum is emerging from alternative settings. This new material for schools, the reasons for us to engage in educational communities, is welcomed and is potentially influential upon conventional school practice.

We answer yes when we see new patterns of human interaction appear to be possible in alternative schools. The term "humaneness" was defined in school-related terms earlier. We note that people who engage in new practices together and who live out the characteristics of the alternative schools as described by Ellis do, indeed, look different from their conventional counterparts. This is important for those of us who wish to somehow reconstruct conventional schooling. The implications of the possible link between well-articulated ideology, the activities to carry it out and the consequences in terms of human relations can help us to speculate upon how such processes will or could be promoted in settings other than alternative schools.

If, however, we look at a change strategy in terms of its ability to spread to others, to become pervasive, to change people and organizations above and beyond the innovative group itself, we must answer that

alternative schools are not yet change strategies per se. Recognizing the immense difficulty of linking a new institution systematically and supportively to other institutions or other parts of the same institutions, we suspect that the enormous energy which is required has already been expended in the creation and maintenance of the alternative school. In an ideal world, of course, the larger system would attend to the matters of support and linkage. There is evidence from at least one study that we cannot expect such attention. Griffin noted that of three possible levels of decision making in a school system, the weakest in terms of systematic decision making and consequences was the institutional level--just the collectivity within the school system that should create sustaining systems for alternative schools. The blemish in terms of change strategy, then, must be seen to be borne by both the larger school system and the alternative school. But, we submit that until such linkage between the new school structure and the continuing one is made, alternative schools will continue to exist in isolation, perhaps splendid isolation, but still isolation.

Another problem of linkage is that of the relation between the alternative school and the larger public. Although we applaud the participation of community persons in the life of the alternative school and see that as a potential change possibility, we also observe that the alternative school movement has not built a credibility base with the public. In periods of serious social and economic pressures it appears that public support for schooling reverts to support for what is known rather than for what is still largely unknown. As a strategy for change,

alternative schools have, we think, given too little attention to building strong and deep roots into the communities they serve which will keep them from being pulled up and tossed out during periods of conservative public opinion. In other words, alternative schools have been shortsighted in terms of attachment to the larger outside society.

Also related to examining alternative schools as change strategies, we return to Ellis' recommendation that a broadly understood set of terms and practices be developed. Although we have learned much about schooling through study of alternative schools, the participants in the movement appear to have somehow neglected the codification of their accumulated wisdom. This, of course, relates directly to the issue of public support and acknowledgement that alternative schools may be still a bit fragile in terms of that support. We applaud the beginnings of getting at new understandings but are less than sanguine about visible attempts to systematically use these new understandings as a basis for increased knowledge and improved practice. We believe that alternative schools can be considered change strategies, broadly conceived, only when a body of supportive practice and theory can be demonstrated to be somehow more positive than that which supports conventional school programs. Unfortunately those who create new alternatives often don't have time to write about them.

Underscoring the complexity of the relations between the alternative school and the conventional schools within the same system, we note that alternative school people tend to spend much more time and effort, generally speaking, upon their work than do their conventional colleagues. What seems to occur is an increased distance, largely the consequence of different expectations about the nature of schooling

and the energy necessary to make an alternate expectation work, between the conventional schools and the alternative schools. This distance can be explained as, indeed, we have tried to do. But, necessarily, it must be considered a negative factor in terms of whether or not the alternative school will directly influence the conventional school.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at the alternative school movement from three perspectives and attempted to present some of the understandings that have emerged through research and other forms of observing practice. Admittedly, we may have raised more questions, implicitly, than we have provided explicit answers. This is a natural consequence of trying to understand what is essentially a new form for most of us.

We would like to acknowledge that the alternative school movement has been of enormous importance to many of us as we have tried to understand schools more clearly and with greater empathy. We hope that our alternative school friends will not find our statements accusatory or negatively critical. Our hope is that we can continue to inquire systematically and carefully and that that inquiry will be guided by our common understandings, our emerging body of organized knowledge about the movement and its relation to other social institutions, and by the development of a research methodology which is adequate to the task of capturing the essence and the consequences of a major innovation, the alternative school.